

Arnott's Marionettes

Anne Fuhrman

In the dim light of daybreak, two small figures on stage vehemently argue. Spellbound at once, the audience is drawn deeper and deeper into the ancient Greek tale as it unfolds. Though manipulated by strings, the figures seem to have a life of their own, moving and speaking of their own free will. Far from just an ordinary puppet show, the marionette performance they are witnessing is a true triumph of technical and artistic achievement.

Peter Arnott, chairman of the Tufts University Drama Department, performed Sophocles' *Antigone* in the Bowne Theater on November 3. With nearly every seat filled, the free performance by the internationally renowned puppeteer was extremely favorably received by its viewers. Although the story itself (concerning Antigone's decision to defy state orders and bury her dead brother) is a tragedy, Arnott enabled the audience to see and appreciate the humor written in the play. If Mr. Arnott had stood on stage for over an hour and recited from memory the entire play, it would have been admirable, though perhaps not very exciting; however, the fact that he stood for the same length of time, manipulated a dozen different puppets, and performed every part in a manner unique to each character is truly mind-boggling. The performance, Arnott admitted, "...seems to have a kind of hypnotic effect on the audience."

Tuesday morning Arnott conducted a "workshop" to provide some insight into the motivation behind his unique theater. (Actually, while marionettes are considered primarily children's entertainment in Western societies, in Eastern countries like Japan, puppets are a

major art form.) If fact, although the Marionette Theatre of Peter Arnott was originated in 1948, it was not until years later that Arnott began to understand why he was able to successfully perform Greek tragedies with puppets. He realized that if modern theaters performed these plays, they were being compressed into a format for which they were never designed. Only two solutions appeared possible: either put the plays back in the original theaters, or shrink the performance.

The average Greek theater would seat 15,000 people. The audience would actually be able to see very little—emphasis was on the words, rather than on a great deal of expression or movement as in modern theater. By watching the play being performed with puppets, the audience sees about as much as would have been possible in a Greek amphitheater. Emphasis is once again thrown back to the language. Greek drama was a listening experience, rather like modern-day radio drama.

Most of Arnott's marionettes have the standard nine strings—one for each shoulder, each hand, each leg, each side of the head, and one for the back. The controls are smaller than usual—only one bar—so that two characters can be worked closely together without tangling. Each is considered to look as much like the original Greek actor as possible. One of Arnott's favorite ideas behind these productions is as follows: a central theme in many Greek plays concerns the manipulation of the characters by the gods. Through the use of puppets, these characters are literally manipulated as they act their parts.


Perhaps the most captivating aspect about Peter Arnott is the genuine delight he seems to have in his work. He displays an air of almost child-like pleasure when speaking of his craft. This affection allows Arnott, and in turn the audience, to become totally immersed in tales of Greek tragedy.

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